

COVID-19 – Talking with Children and Youth

A new virus such as the one that causes COVID-19 can create anxiety and be difficult for children and youth to understand, especially if someone near them is sick, or they see or hear troubling messages on the radio, internet or television. It is normal for children to feel worried or nervous and have questions. Communication should reflect the diverse linguistic, literacy and cultural characteristics and needs of the children. It will be important for facility staff to monitor for discrimination and/or bullying surrounding COVID-19, in particular towards those who are being monitored for symptoms. Program staff should make all efforts to ensure that misinformation is clarified and anti-discrimination/bullying protocols are adhered to.

Program staff will need to pay attention to children's feelings and reactions. How the situation is handled will strongly affect how children will respond. Group care settings can consider the following:

Provide reassurance

Reassure children and youth about their personal safety and health. Telling children that it is okay to be concerned is comforting. Reassure them that they are safe and there are many things they can do to stay healthy:

- **Hand washing:** Wash hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds, or use a sanitizer, especially after coughing or sneezing and when handling food.
- **Cough/sneeze etiquette:** Cough and sneeze into arm or tissue.
- **Stay home when sick:** Children should tell staff if not feeling well, and together, make a plan to stay home from school.
- **Keep clean:** Keep hands away from face and mouth.
- **Stay healthy:** Stay healthy by eating healthy foods, keeping physically active, getting enough sleep.

Listen to Children and Youth

Children and youth want to be heard. They do not need detailed information about events but they do need to talk about their feelings. Let them know they can ask questions. Answer questions honestly but make sure that the information is suitable for their age level. If you don't know the answers to their questions it's okay to say so and together look for resources that can answer their questions. Remember children are often listening when you talk to others about COVID-19. Staff should be mindful of how children share information in less supervised settings e.g. before and after school, lunch and snack times, recess and on personal time. It may

be in these settings where children can become misinformed. It will be important for administrators and staff to correct this misinformation when they are made aware of it.

Maintain routines

Maintain familiar activities and routines in the group care setting as it can reinforce the sense of security of children and youth.

Pay attention to media access

Limit media exposure or ensure information being accessed on-line is reputable. Exposure to too much or misinformed resources/media coverage can give children and adults an exaggerated view of the risks association with COVID-19. It may be easier to limit exposure in younger children but this may be more difficult with age. Where feasible, monitor for misinformation and assist children and youth in accessing reliable sources of information. Explain the events as well as you can and help children put information into perspective. Keep children informed about what is happening and what may happen at a level that is suitable for their age.